



Department of Veterans Affairs - VistA

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VistA Frequently Asked Questions

What is the electronic health record?

The electronic health record system integrates all elements of a patient's health history, medications, lab work, x-rays, scans, EKGs, medical diagnoses, and more, in one place. Through VA's remote access capability, the patient's entire record is available at all VA health care sites nationwide.

How extensively is the electronic health record used?

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is currently in use across the VA health care system in more than 1,300 sites, including 156 medical centers, 875 community-based clinics, 136 nursing homes, 44 residential rehabilitation treatment programs, and 207 Veterans Centers.

How long has the electronic health record been available?

Portions of the electronic health record, including medication profiles and laboratory results, have been available for 20 years. In 1998, VHA released the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS), a Windows application capable of interacting with clinical data. Clinicians could use this new system to electronically enter orders and progress notes. Another application now in use makes medical images and scanned documents available nationwide. Many medical centers used these tools to become totally paperless.

Who uses the electronic health record?

All members of the health care team, including desk registration clerks, nurses, and physicians, can access portions of the electronic health record through the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) as needed to fulfill their duties. VA provides greater coordination of care when all members of the team can quickly access the record.

How much does VA spend to provide electronic health record capabilities?

The current cost to VA is approximately \$87 per patient per year, whereas the average cost of a repeated test is \$80.

How have electronic health records reduced costs?

The cost of care per patient in the VA has remained the same for the past 10 years, while costs in other health care systems have risen dramatically during the same period. The electronic health record has been one of the key factors in the cost effectiveness of VA health care. Because of the immediate availability of all medical records, costly tests do not have to be repeated.

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The electronic health record has also made care more efficient; time is no longer wasted retrieving records from file rooms and film can be read at the point of care instead of requiring a trip to the Radiology Department. Because the complete medical history of patients is always available, unnecessary admissions are avoided. The cost of each medication prescribed is listed in the electronic health records order entry system, encouraging providers, whenever possible, to select the most effective and least costly medication.

How do you safeguard patient information?

No one has access to a patient's medical record without proceeding through the proper security menus, providing valid encryption keys, and submitting a secure access code. All data is backed up locally and stored at a secure, off-site facility. VA is committed to providing exceptional health care to our veterans and is equally determined to safeguard health information.

What procedures are in place to preserve patient information in the event of an emergency?

Each medical center has a contingency plan in the unlikely event of a shutdown. Even in emergency situations, such as Hurricane Katrina, when medical centers in New Orleans and Biloxi were evacuated and under water, the electronic health records from those facilities were online and available to providers within hours by transferring backup databases to other locations. The immediate availability of the electronic health records allowed critical treatment to continue uninterrupted, assuring that there were no deaths attributable to a loss of records as a result of the evacuation. In the future, VHA will have all clinical data available in national data centers that will be accessible from any location.

How has the electronic health record improved quality?

VA's electronic health record has largely eliminated all errors stemming from lost or incomplete medical records. One in every seven hospital admissions is due to the lack of a medical record and 20 percent of all lab tests are repeated because the physician cannot access the results. VA is a leader in quality of care and patient satisfaction and is considered one of the safest health care systems in the country.

What are Clinical Reminders and how do they affect patients?

Clinical Reminders are key to VA's success in dramatically improving patient care outcomes. The reminder system alerts physicians and other providers when either an intervention is due or a test is required and automatically places a note in the patient's chart. Additionally, VA can pull data on the performance of individual providers and compare them across facilities and regions. VA can fully and effectively benchmark preventive performance measures because of the clinical reminders system.

How has the electronic health records system changed how clinicians interact with patients?

Rolling a laptop computer to each patient's bedside translates into readily available information at the point of care. Providers say they're much more efficient because all orders can be put into the computer before the team leaves the patient's room.

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How was the transition to the electronic health records system received by health care providers?

Electronic health records have been well received by clinicians and staff across the country. Many professionals say they cannot imagine working without the system.

How can patients access their electronic health record?

Through the My HealtheVet Program, veterans in several pilot sites throughout the country can view their entire medical record through a password-protected and encrypted system. By the end of 2006, VA plans to offer this service to all veterans. Veterans have a personalized access code for the website that links to their record. My HealtheVet improves patient accountability and awareness of their health care. The program engages the veteran as a key partner in the health care team by providing them the ability to see and connect to their health record at any time or place. Veterans can grant access to any private providers they are seeing in their community to improve the quality of their private care as well.

How do you use the system for patient education?

Graphically showing changes in a patient's condition through visual displays of lab tests, vital signs, or medical images increases patient awareness and makes the patient-provider dialogue much more meaningful. The graphing capability of the electronic health record is an excellent teaching tool, allowing clinicians to show patients their progress or changes in their health status over time.

How is the electronic health records system customized?

VA strongly encourages its providers to customize the system for their specific needs. By allowing providers to customize the electronic health record, VA encourages further development and experimentation with new methods of improved health care. Many local customizations are available and include options for order checks, note templates, clinical reminders, specific image views and graphic representation of specific constellations of lab values.

What kind of support systems do you have in place for your providers?

Each medical service has one person who assists users with trouble-shooting, trains new staff, and address any other concerns that may arise. This Automated Data Processing Application Coordinator works very closely with the Information Resource Management team. Clinical Application Coordinators are readily available to assist providers as well by helping them with specific features in the record. Other assistants work directly with clinicians to set up templates and procedures. Collaboration between clinicians and technology experts is excellent and key to future development of the system, both locally and nationally.

How are new users trained to use the electronic health record?

Each new provider and trainee receives a few hours of formal training, but the system is user friendly and new users can begin working with records immediately. VHA's Clinical Application Coordinators are readily available to support providers as needed.

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Does the system include voice recognition software?

Voice recognition software is compatible with the various platforms in the electronic health records, but only a few clinicians use this technology in VA facilities now because the electronic health record is already so easy to use. Those who do use voice recognition are primarily in the Surgery Service and are very enthusiastic about it.

Where is the software being used outside of VA?

The software is being used in several private and public non-VA hospitals and clinic settings both nationally and in foreign countries, including Mexico and Egypt. The software is part of the public domain and is available for a nominal handling fee; however, non-VA users may incur costs associated with commercial component, licensing fees, and ongoing maintenance and operation.

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